US president supports vote to release Epstein files

WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump said on Sunday he backed lawmakers' efforts to release more files related to sex offender Jeffrey Epstein, despite previous opposition to the measure.

"House Republicans should vote to release the Epstein files, because we have nothing to hide," Trump wrote on his *Truth Social* platform.

The 79-year-old Republican has accused Democrats of pushing an "Epstein hoax" after emails emerged in which the disgraced financier suggested Trump "knew about the girls". Some critics have accused Trump of trying to conceal details about his own alleged wrongdoing — something the president denies — by looking to block the vote.

The issue has divided his typically loyal Republican party and driven a rift between Trump and some of his closest allies within his Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement.

Over the weekend, Trump withdrew his endorsement for Congresswoman and MAGA stalwart Marjorie Taylor Greene's re-election bid.

Republican House Speaker Mike Johnson has said he would hold a vote this week on a bid to force the Justice Department to release the remaining files related to the Epstein probe.

"Some members of the Republican Party are being used, and we can't let that happen," Trump said in his post, in reference to lawmakers who backed a call by Democrats to release the files.—AFP

PRAGUE: People light candles at a memorial to mark the 36th anniversary of the 1989 Velvet Revolution against the then-Communist government in former Czechoslovakia.—Reuters

BBC 'determined to fight' Trump's defamation claim

LONDON: The *British Broadcasting Corporation* is determined to fight any legal action filed by US President Donald Trump and sees no basis for a defamation case over its editing of one of his speeches, its chair said on Monday.

Trump said last week he was likely to sue the broadcaster for up to $5 billion after it spliced together separate excerpts of a speech on Jan 6, 2021, when his supporters stormed the Capitol. The edit created the impression he had called for violence.

Samir Shah, the *BBC* chair, sent a letter to Trump to apologise for the edit, the broadcaster said on Thursday, but it added it strongly disagreed there was a basis for a defamation claim.

Trump told reporters on Friday he would sue for anywhere between $1bn and $5bn.

"We'll sue them for anywhere between a billion and five billion dollars, probably sometime next week. I think I have to do it. They've even admitted that they cheated," Trump told reporters aboard Air Force One.

Shah told *BBC* staff in an email on Monday there was speculation about the possibility of legal action, including potential costs or settlements.

"In all this we are, of course, acutely aware of the privilege of our funding and the need to protect our licence fee payers, the British public," Shah wrote.

"I want to be very clear with you — our position has not changed. There is no basis for a defamation case and we are determined to fight this."

The documentary, made by a third party, aired in Britain before the US election in November last year. It showed Trump telling supporters "we're going to walk down to the Capitol" and we "fight like hell", a comment he made in a different part of his speech. Trump had in fact said supporters would "cheer on our brave senators and congressmen and women".

The edit was made public after the *Daily Telegraph* published a leaked internal *BBC* report.

The report, written by an independent adviser, contained wider criticism of the *BBC*'s news output, including a lack of balance in stories about trans issues, and led to the resignation of the director general, Tim Davie, and head of news Deborah Turness.

Trump's lawyers said the edit caused the president "overwhelming reputational and financial harm".

Suing in Florida

They said they would sue in Florida, rather than in Britain, where the one-year limit to file a defamation case has expired.

Trump will face a tougher legal standard in the United States given the protection of freedom of speech in the constitution, the lawyers said.

The *BBC* is likely to argue that the programme was not broadcast and was not available on its streaming service in the US, so voters in Florida could not have seen it.

The *BBC*, which is funded by a mandatory levy on TV-watching households, is also widely expected to challenge the reputational harm claim on grounds that Trump went on to win the election, and say the edit was not done in malice.

The issue has triggered wide debate in the UK, and Shah said "we are, of course, acutely aware of the privilege of our funding and the need to protect our licence fee payers, the British public".—Reuters

Gunmen kidnap 25 schoolgirls in Nigeria

LAGOS: Gunmen from a criminal gang kidnapped 25 people and killed a staff member in an early morning raid on a north-western Nigerian girls' secondary school on Monday.

The attack comes more than a decade after 276 girls were abducted from Chibok, in the restive northeastern Borno state, and sparked international outcry that rallied people around the "#BringBackOurGirls" global social media campaign.

Since then, there has been a string of other abductions involving schoolchildren across northern parts of Nigeria.

Police said on Monday said the gang armed with "sophisticated weapons, shooting sporadically, stormed the Government Girls Comprehensive Secondary School" in Kebbi state at 4am.

Police were deployed, but "unfortunately, the suspected bandits had already scaled through the fence of the school and abducted twenty-five students from their hostel to unknown destination", police said in a statement.

The school deputy head was shot dead while a security guard was injured during the attack.

The military, police tactical units and local vigilantes have "been deployed in the area and they are currently combing the bandits' routes and nearby forest" in a bid to rescue the abducted students and arrest the gangs, police said.

Hostage-taking spiralling

Nigeria's northwest has for years been seeing a rise in heavily armed criminal gangs known as "bandits" who steal cattle, raid villages, kidnap and kill residents and loot and burn homes. It has become the region most affected by kidnappings.

Africa's most populous country has also been plagued by armed violence since the 2009 emergence of the Boko Haram group in the Lake Chad basin, in the northeast of the country.—AFP

Court orders Thai ex-PM Thaksin to pay $500m tax bill

BANGKOK: Thailand's Supreme Court ordered jailed former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra on Monday to pay back taxes over the sale of his telecoms firm, the judiciary said, with reports putting the sum due at around half a billion dollars.

In 2006, Thaksin was dogged by corruption allegations and mired in controversy over the tax-free sale of shares in his company, Shin Corp.

Later that year, he was ousted as prime minister in a coup and then went into exile for more than a decade.

The 76-year-old politician, one of Thailand's richest people, is currently serving a prison sentence in Bangkok for corruption during his time in office.

On Monday, the Supreme Court overruled an appeals court decision in the tax case, "forcing Thaksin to follow the order by the Revenue Department to pay tax", court spokesman Suriyan Hongvilai said.

Suriyan did not provide the specific sum to be paid nor the court's reasoning for its ruling.

Several Thai media outlets reported that the court ordered Thaksin to pay 17.6 billion baht ($540 million) in tax liabilities and fines.—AFP

Louvre closes gallery due to structural weakness

PARIS: The Louvre Museum said on Monday that it was closing one of its galleries as a precaution after an audit revealed structural weaknesses in some of the beams in the building.

The Campana Gallery, which houses nine rooms dedicated to ancient Greek ceramics, will be closed while investigations are conducted into "certain beams supporting the floors of the second floor" above it, a statement said.

The announcement has no link to the recent robbery at the world's most visited art gallery, but is more unwelcome news for an institution that has faced severe criticism in France over its security shortcomings.

A four-strong gang raided the Louvre last month with an extendable ladder and angle grinders in broad daylight, making off with jewellery worth an estimated $102 million in front of startled visitors.

Before the break-in, the museum's top administrator had warned publicly about conditions inside the former royal palace, which saw 8.7 million people visit its vast galleries last year.

Louvre boss Laurence des Cars warned in a memo in January about a "proliferation of damage in museum spaces, some of which are in very poor condition".

The Campana Gallery is located on the first floor in the Sully wing at the far eastern end of the complex, with the second floor above it identified by the museum as having structural issues. The area is currently used as office space.—AFP

UK toughens asylum rules amid rise of anti-immigrant Reform party

LONDON: Britain announced on Monday it would make refugee status temporary and speed up the deportation of those who arrive illegally, in a major overhaul aimed at stemming the rise of the populist Reform UK party and tackling abuse of the current system.

Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood outlined changes to how the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) should be interpreted by courts to give the government greater control over who can remain in Britain.

Prime Minister Keir Starmer, a former human rights lawyer, said Britain's current asylum regime "is a significant pull factor" to asylum seekers, was more permissive than other countries in Europe, and was not designed to deal with the large number of people moving across the globe.

In what the centre-left Labour government says is the most sweeping asylum policy overhaul of modern times, Mahmood announced changes that include quadrupling to 20 years the time refugees will have to wait to settle permanently.

The government also threatened visa bans on Angola, Namibia and the Democratic Republic of Congo unless those countries accepted the return of illegal migrants and criminals.

Boats from France

Immigration has become the most important issue for voters in recent months, with those arriving in small boats from France the most visible sign of illegal arrivals. The issue has helped propel Reform UK, led by veteran anti-EU campaigner Nigel Farage, into a commanding opinion poll lead.

Zia Yusuf, a member of Reform, said the public were sick of being told there was no way to prevent people from arriving illegally on beaches, but said existing laws and likely opposition from Starmer's lawmakers meant Mahmood's proposed changes were unlikely to ever happen.

Tony Vaughan, a Labour lawmaker, was one of the first to publicly criticise the proposals, adding the rhetoric would encourage "the same culture of divisiveness that sees racism and abuse growing in our communities".

In the year to the end of March, 109,343 people claimed asylum in Britain, up 17 per cent on the previous 12 months. Still, fewer people claim asylum in Britain than in its EU peers France, Germany, Italy or Spain. Most migrants arrive legally. Net migration reached a record high of 906,000 in the year to June 2023, before it fell to 431,000 last year, partly reflecting tighter rules.

`Dark forces'

Shabana Mahmood said Britain had always been a tolerant and welcoming country to refugees, and she realised that her proposals might receive backlash from some in her own party, who said it was wrong to deport people recognised as refugees.

But she said an asylum system prone to abuse was allowing "dark forces" to stir up anger, such as protests outside hotels housing migrants.

"Unless we act, we risk losing popular consent for having an asylum system at all," Mahmood, whose parents moved to Britain from Pakistan in the late 1960s and 1970s, wrote in the *Guardian* newspaper. "A country without secure borders is a less safe country for those who look like me."

Under her proposals, the government wants to change the interpretation of a provision of the ECHR, governing the right to a family life.—Reuters

ATHENS: Greeks march during a commemoration of the 1973 students uprising against the US-backed junta. The uprising prompted the junta to send troops and eventually led to the ouster of the regime.—AFP

SANTIAGO: Leftist candidate Jeannette Jara, who will fight far-right leader Jose Antonio Kast in Chile's presidential run-off next month. She topped the first round of voting on Sunday.—AFP

POITIERS: France's Culture Minister Rachida Dati (centre) visits the Notre-Dame-la-Grande church to assess work on its restoration. The 11th-century Romanesque church is famous for its richly decorated western facade.—AFP

NEWSMAKERS

Cruise gets honorary Oscar, touts power of cinema

LOS ANGELES: How does a person summarise the 45-year career of Tom Cruise in a four-minute speech? "Mission impossible", said director Alejandro Inarritu on Sunday as Hollywood celebrated the movie star with an honorary Oscar.

Inarritu, who directed Cruise in an untitled film set for release next October, introduced the *Top Gun* star and said his talent extended beyond the dangerous stunts he has become famous for.

"It is not how far he runs or how high he jumps," Inarritu said. "It's how precisely he decides to move, those tiny calibrations." Honorary Oscar statuettes were handed out to Cruise and three others selected by the Board of Governors of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences.

The 63-year-old Cruise, a four-time Oscar nominee who has never won the award, was chosen for work in films from *Risky Business* to two *Top Gun* movies and the *Mission: Impossible* franchise. He has also become a prominent champion for the movie business as it faces competition from streaming and social media.

Accepting his award, Cruise talked about how seeing movies in a theater impressed him as a child. "Suddenly the world was so much larger than the one that I knew," he told a crowd of luminaries that included Steven Spielberg, Leonardo DiCaprio, and Ariana Grande. He said he worked every job he could to earn money for movie tickets.

TOM Cruise poses with his award.—AFP

"I will always do everything I can to support this art form and to champion new voices, to protect what makes cinema powerful, hopefully without too many more broken bones," he said to laughter. Cruise broke his ankle while filming a stunt in 2017. "Making films is not what I do. It's who I am," Cruise added.

The gala also honored Dolly Parton with the Jean Hersholt Humanitarian Award for her charitable efforts, including founding a library that has provided more than 300 million books to children.—Reuters

CHARLOTTE: Shana Blake, an immigrant wearing a Statue of Liberty outfit, sits in a cage while the Customs and Border Patrol conducts raids on the streets of the US state of North Carolina.—Reuters

SEOUL: South Koreans take part in a kimchi-making festival at Garak Market.—AFP